



## Grieving for the Salmon Nation

Posted: [October 04, 2002](#) - 10:04am EST

Old timers will tell you that nature is undergoing severe impacts as a result of the human population's use of natural resources. It is one of those ongoing imbalances that gets worse and worse. This season the Pacific salmon are paying the price.

With much more water given over to agriculture during this past summer drought and a particularly heavy chinook run this fall, tens of thousands of Klamath River fish, perhaps as many as thirty thousand so far, have died as chinook spawning gets underway. The fish did not have enough water to complete their full cycle of life. There are too many people, too many concerns, vying for too little water.

The deeply troubling sign of tens of thousands of dead fish augurs badly for the embattled salmon, which biologists predict will decrease greatly over the next few years. "... Thousands of dead fish, everywhere ... A lot of them lining the banks, eyes popping out, guts coming out ... It smells pretty bad," Mike Belchick, a Yurok Tribal biologist, told reporters. North coast Indian fishermen and tribes, among others, mourned the loss, expressing outrage at the calamity that threatens fish, industries and ways of life. It takes young salmon three years to leave the gravel beds, swim out to sea and return as adults to spawn in their river of origin. Given the kill this year, 2005-2006 likely will be "disaster years."

For 15 years the federal government limited ocean fishing of salmon, in order to guarantee enough of the "treaty-guaranteed" fish to the tribes. Commercial fishermen got more leeway to fish this year, due to healthy Klamath salmon runs. But both drought and its opposite extreme, rain storms, can wreak havoc on spawning habitats. High summer stream flows may have damaged salmon habitat on the Russian River, water officials revealed this week. On the Klamath, however, both federal biologists and tribal officials have long complained that the fish simply are not getting enough water. They say that's what killed the tens of thousands of chinook salmon, which congregated in shallow waters, spreading disease and beginning the massive kill. The Klamath, a massive river system that is California's second producer of salmon, drains the slopes of Mount Shasta and parts of southern Oregon.

The water issue often pits the fishermen and Indian tribes versus farmers south of Klamath Lake. There is not enough water for all. Last year the Klamath Basin irrigators had their water allotments cut severely. There were nasty anti-Indian incidents, including threats and intimidation shootings. The farmers got a lot more water this year, courtesy of the Bureau of Reclamation. The farmers and the Bureau deny any blame in the tragedy of the salmon. Everyone does, but too many take too much from the Klamath River. Again, there is not enough water to go around.

The Yurok tribe is cultural caretaker and natural resource manager over much of these waters, with stewardship over 80 percent of the tribal allotment for salmon on the lower Klamath. The salmon kill, they report, is a "worst nightmare scenario." This is the sense from Sue Masten, Yurok chairwoman and former president of the National Congress of American Indians. One tribal biologist Dave Hillemeier says they will not know the full damage until the current chinook run ends in December. Other Yurok report that no one from their tribe has ever witnessed such a catastrophic "natural" event. It has no precedent, in history or oral tradition.

Apparently, the Yurok tribe objected to the projected water flow, as proposed by the Bureau of Reclamation, and predicted that the limited water in the plan would ultimately spell disaster for fish runs. They point out that only four months into the controversial ten-year operational plan, a major disaster is unfolding. As the dead salmon rot, streams are experiencing contamination.

In light of this tragedy, we are reminded of the event, in late March of this year, in which Secretary of Interior Gale Norton personally cranked open the headgate, releasing irrigation water for Klamath Basin farmers. At that time the Yurok had expressed their grave concerns about downstream impacts. Masten was quoted in Indian Country Today saying, "Recklessly diverting this water is going to have a devastating effect on our fisheries." Were she and her impassioned Yurok delegation correct? Regrettably, it certainly looks that way.

Various groups, like the Klamath Water Users Association, are calling for an "effective, long-term management plan" to provide for the water needs of both users and the environment. They want to come up with "a reasonable balance." Problem is: the supply of available Klamath water simply can not meet the demands of farmers, fishermen and still sustain a nurturing natural environment.

The Bureau of Reclamation is now releasing a bit more water into the Klamath River, while most agency spokespeople blame multiple causes for the horrific fish kill. The water is a bit late and it takes days for results where it counts downstream. Pat Foulk, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, is right when she calls the river, "an overused ecosystem." But that is not an issue.

The issue is the right of the Salmon Nation to exist and thrive.

Yurok Chairwoman Masten is working to create legislation that will increase flow to the Lower Klamath River. She reports that her tribe will join the lawsuit brought by a coalition of fishing and environmental groups that filed a lawsuit in this regard.

It is a disgrace to see endangered species disregarded so blatantly. We support the Yurok's and all efforts to right this wrong, for they are fighting for those beings that cannot fight for themselves.

Our hearts ache for our lost relatives.

---

This article can be found at <http://IndianCountry.com/?1033740362>